DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 282 269 CS 505 617

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TITLE Humor in the Films of Alfred Hitchcock.
PUB DATE Nov 86
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the International Conference on Wit and Humor in Literature and the Visual Arts (Atlanta, GA, November 1986).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Auteurism; Film Criticism; Films; *Film Study; *Humor; Literary Styles; Media Research; *Popular Culture
IDENTIFIERS Audience Awareness; Audience Response; Film Genres; Film Theory; *Hitchcock (Alfred)

ABSTRACT

Although usually considered the "master of suspense," Alfred Hitchcock relished working humor into his films, frequently juxtaposing it against scenes of utter gruesomeness. This placement of comic elements--comic relief--in an otherwise serious murder mystery or suspense thriller became a Hitchcock trademark early in his career. Hitchcock's humor generally appeared in four different ways: (1) the famous cameos of himself, designed as a brief amusement for the audience (he appeared in 36 out of 53 films); (2) humor derived from exaggeration, stereotyping, or caricature; (3) humor involving sexual innuendo; and (4) true "black" or macabre humor that results from the juxtaposition of the horrible or dangerous with the absurd or mundane. He treated the stereotypes of the staid, reserved Englishman and the vaguely villainous, culturally pretentious German in "The Man Who Knew Too Much," while "The Lady Vanishes," "The Thirty-Nine Steps," and "Rear Window" are all touched with the humor of sexual innuendo. The macabre appears in "Rear Window," in the guise of a discussion about dismembering a corpse, and in "The Trouble with Harry," in the guise of a corpse that will not stay buried. While it would be incorrect to state that Hitchcock's movies are comedies or that their popularity is due primarily to their comic elements, it is these humorous and outrageous scenes that help make his films distinctly "Hitchcock." (NKA)

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Humor in the Films of Alfred Hitchcock

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Paper presented at the International Conference on Wit and Humor in Literature and the Visual Arts

Atlanta, Georgia November, 1986

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Humor in the Films of Alfred Hitchcock

A woman is viciously stabbed to death in a shower by a psychotic man who assumes his dead mother's identity. An airplane pursues a man across an open field in an attempt to shoot him if not slice him into oblivion with the spinning propellor. A seemingly genteel fruit salesman brutally rapes a young woman in her office over the lunch hour, before strangling her to death with his necktie. These scenes, well-remembered by all devoted fans of Alfred Hitchcock, are from Psycho, North By Northwest, and Frenzy, respectively. They are representative of the darker themes frequently explored by the "master of suspense:" the normal person who is anything but normal, the terror of being pursued with no escape, murderers masquerading as gentlemen, sexual violence, death. They are themes--along with espionage and revenge--which run through many of Hitchcock's films made both in England and in America. Audiences came to expect the morbid, the gruesome. They came to be frightened and shocked, and they were rarely disappointed.

To classify Hitchcock as the "master of suspense" and nothing more is to take a rather narrow view of both the man and his work. Sarris believes he is much more, and raises an important question: "If suspense were all that mattered in Hitch's universe, how could we look at his movies again and again and again without becoming bored by the unvarying mechanisms of the plot?" (9). Certainly the unusual characters, ironic situations, and comic twists all contribute to the appeal of a Hitchcock film. Audiences enjoy them on repeated viewings, even when the endings are already quite well-known.

Hitchcock was a man of considerable humor who enjoyed a good joke and relished in placing humor into his films, frequently juxtaposed against scenes of utter gruesomeness. One might call these moments "comic relief." Another might prefer the term "gallows humor" or "black comedy." Haley suggests that humor is used

"to keep the pressure off the audience" (119). It is this humor that allows the audience to enjoy the film on a level quite distinct from the level of mystery or suspense. Perry states that Hitchcock "has never lacked the courage to go straight to his audience and invite their complicity. And it is in this quality, the spectator's sharing of a sinister joke with the man behind the camera, that much of Hitchcock's appeal lies" (142).

The placement of comic elements in an otherwise serious film--murder mystery or suspense thriller-- became a Hitchcock trademark early on. The director expressed his opinion on the subject in 1937 when he compared filmic technique to stage plays: "I think public taste is turning to like comedy and drama more mixed-up; and this is another move away from the conventions of the stage. . . In a film you keep your whole action flowing; you can have comedy and drama running together and weave them in and out" (LaValley 39). Some of the best examples of this combination are to be found in such films as The Thirty-Nine Steps, The Lady Vanishes, and Rear Window.

Hitchcock's humor in some films has been described as that of a practical joker. Such a description is accurate if one is to believe the stories told by and about the director during his fifty years in the art of cinema. Hitchcock admitted to Francois Truffaut in an interview in 1966 that "I do have a weakness for practical jokes and have played quite a few in my time" (Hitchcock 225).

Examples abound. Spoto recounts an amusing episode that occurred on the first day of shooting of The Thirty-Nine Steps (1935) (Life of Alfred Hitchcock 148). The principal actors, Madeleine Carroll and Robert Donat, had not met each other. The first scene to be filmed was a sequence in which the couple escape from a group of spies and flee across the countryside. They were handcuffed to each other so the spies could better keep track of them. Hitchcock devised a scheme to test this new relationship. Spoto's description is amusing:

> Precisely at eight-thirty that morning, he introduced his two leading players, explained the sequence, and snapped a pair of handcuffs on to their wrists. He then led them through a rehearsal on the sound stage, over the dummy bridge and fences, until he was told that some technical matter needed his attention and he advised them that they could take a rest. But he then told them that he had somehow mislaid the key to the handcuffs, and he vanished until late afternoon. . . By teatime, Hitchcock had suddenly found the key (which, Donat later discovered, had been carefully deposited with a studio guard as soon as the manacles were fastened). The actors, of course, were tired, angry, disheveled, uncomfortable, and acutely embarrassed. But Hitchcock was delighted when the rest of the cast and crew found out about his little trick and were shocked. He wanted to know how many people were discussing the manner in which the humiliated couple had coped with details of a decidedly personal nature. "There was no better technician in the business," recalled Jack Whitehead, second-unit cameraman on the film, "but when it came to personal relations, there was certainly a streak of the sadist in him." (Spoto, Life of Alfred Hitchcock 148)

Ivor Montagu recalls the practical joker side of his old friend, also, but sees the characteristic less as sadistic than as playful. Hitchcock would play with his favorite actors and actresses much as he would build a film to play with the feelings of the audience. Montagu recollects that "when I knew him, and doubtless later, he loved practical jokes, but I never knew him to play one except as part of a tit-for-tat series with a friend who would repay and surpass them in return" (193). Regarding Madeleine Carroll in The Thirty-Nine Steps, Montagu adds: "Madeleine was a trouper and turned the tables on us by appreciating this treatment and asking for more. Of course Hitch had divined that she would" (193).

In 1960, 25 years after The Thirty-Nine Steps, Hitchcock would make another kind of film, a film considered by some to be the supreme practical joke on unsuspecting filmgoers the world over. The film was Psycho. Harris and Lasky explain Hitchcock's attitude in regard to this film: "Hitchcock sparkles with menacing glee, especially when he has pulled off one of the practical jokes he delights in. Hitchcock's humor is with him constantly. He feels his pièce de résistance was achieved by what he did to hundreds of millions of people who viewed Psycho, many of whom were afraid to take showers for weeks after" (5).

Types of Humor in the Hitchcock Film

Having said that Alfred Hitchcock, both the private person and the film director, genuinely enjoyed a good practical joke, one must take a close look at the tangible manifestations of that practical-joker mentality. Those manifestations are, of course, his films.

Hitchcock's humor is of four different types in his films. The first type is represented by the famous cameos of himself, designed only as a brief amusement for those audience members alert enough to pick out the portly director. The second type is humor derived from exaggeration, stereotyping, or caricature. Frequently this type revolves around the portrayal of ethnic characteristics of the English, Scotch, or Germans. Humor involving sexual innuendo represents the third type. Sly and suggestive, these comic scenes and situations are always in good taste but manage to amuse an audience otherwise caught up in the intrigues of the plot. The fourth type of humor is the true "black comedy" or "macabre humor" that results from the juxtaposition of the horrible or dangerous with the absurd or mundane. This last type of humor is by far the most common of the four types and the one most audiences and critics have come to associate with the Hitchcock film.

Humor in the Cameos

It is well-known that Hitchcock made a brief "cameo" appearance in many of his films--36 out of 53 to be exact. Although many involve his merely walking by on the street, several are memorable because they are wryly amusing. The shot, though brief, adds an interesting or amusing dimension to the film.

As early as Blackmail (1929), Hitchcock is seen as a passenger on a train, trying to read a book while being bothered by an energetic young boy in the next seat. He finally takes a swat at the child with his hat.

In Waltzes From Vienna (1933), Hitchcock is a cook who climbs up a ladder to peer into a bedroom. Freeman states that "he has a distinctly lascivious look in his eye. Standing on that ladder, Hitch looks remarkably like the late John Belushi peering in the sorority house window in Animal House" (58).

The famous cameo in Lifeboat (1943), of course, shows the before and after photographs of Hitchcock in a newspaper ad for a fictional diet product called Reduco. William Bendix holds up the paper to read it, and the audience is treated to this comical and surprising view of the familiar director.

In Strangers on a Train (1951), Hitchcock is seen boarding a train carrying, of all things, a huge double bass. In The Birds (1963), he is seen leaving a pet shop early in the film, as Tippi Hedren enters. Again, he is not alone. This time he is walking two small dogs (his own terriers, incidentally).

The humor in the cameo appearances is not usually hilarious or sustained. It is like the one-liner joke, or the punch line. A totally unexpected person (Hitchcock) enters the scene doing or carrying something just a bit off-beat or amusing, never advancing the plot, but eliciting a chuckle from the audience.

Humor of the Stereotype

Much of the humor in Hitchcock's films derives from his ability to exploit

the absurdity of stereotypical behavior. He may take the characteristics of the staid, conservative Englishman, or the pretentious German, or the ineffectual, timid husband, and exaggerate those characteristics to comical proportions. The humor, then, is the result of an audience response to certain key elements of what is essentially a caricature. The person we are laughing at possesses qualities we may have perceived in ourselves or in others, but now they are exaggerated to an extreme. There are numerous examples to which we may turn.

Jill, the female protagonist in The Man Who Knew Too Much (1934), is married to a man ". . .who is a caricature of a certain type of reserved Englishman. Despite the resources he discovers within himself in the course of the film, we do not believe that he will ever be capable of kindling his wife's imagination" (Rothman 112). Hitchcock would return again and again to this notion of the ridiculous Englishman, the man who is so obsessed with civility and propriety that he is difficult if not impossible to stir to action, even in the midst of imminent danger to those around him.

Many of Hitchcock's films of the '30's and '40's portray the villain as vaguely German. Despite the menacing nature of Peter Lorre in The Man Who Knew Too Much, there are humorous overtones to the character. He seems to appreciate good music and he quotes Shakespeare. These signs of outward refinement perhaps represent "a sly poke at the cultural pretensions of the Nazis." When considered historically, "this convention of the cultured, upper-class villain dates back to Victorian melodrama, where it delighted the largely lower-class audience"(Weis 91).

Hitchcock parodies religion in the same film. His fake high priestess is a caricature of all spiritualists who would ensnare the unsuspecting or naive. Spoto feels the film "opts more for comedy than for suspense. The church scene is a perfect parody of low nonconformism ('You are to be initiated into the mysteries of the first circle of the sevenfold ray at the Tabernacle of the Sun'). The difficulties of foreign languages and the inefficiency of the police are also

targets for Hitchcockian satire" (Spoto, Art of Alfred Hitchcock 35). We see, for example, a frustrated man in an office literally yelling his questions, in English, to a policeman who speaks only German. The situation is a wonderful parody of the stereotypical behavior of the foreigner who feels that increased vocal volume will somehow induce comprehension! In this scene, Hitchcock chooses to pun on both the "hair" theme (developed earlier in the film) and "the motif of unmanly men" (Yacowar 177). The dialogue between the Englishman and the German policeman goes something like this:

Bob: Der Britischer Consul. Is he here? Is he haire?

Gendarme: Ja, er ist ein herre.

Hitchcock parodies other nationalities besides the British and German. There is considerable humor in his caricature of the typical Scotsman in The Thirty-Nine Steps (1935). Hannay, the protagonist, is on the loose in Scotland and spends the night in the humble cottage of a local farmer named John. Hitchcock treats John with a comic array of Scotch characteristics. In Rothman's words, John is "short of words, crafty, always thinking of ways of squeezing an extra penny's profit, puritanical, and suspicious, particularly of Englishmen. A stereotype of the Scotsman, he adds local color and his presence is somehow reassuring" (135).

Stereotypical humor is also found in some of Hitchcock's later films. In Rear Window (1954), "a bagful of tricks performed at long range to an audience of three" (Graham 433), we meet a newlywed couple who rent an apartment opposite James Stewart's. Every time we see them or their new home they are in the process of pulling down a shade to exclude the world around them. Other characters that add a touch of humor throughout this otherwise suspenseful film are Miss Torso, the attractive dancer who routinely fights off men in her apartment, and the older couple who sleep outside on their fire escape on hot summer nights, often get rained on, and who lower their pet dog down to the garden in a basket (Dent 762).

Humor of Sexual Innuendo

In several of his films Hitchcock pokes fun at sexual mores or depicts humorous situations that have their bases in sexual behavior or attitudes. Although the director was considered by most who knew him to be modest and conservative in sexual matters, his sense of humor was anything but priggish. He liked to tease his young actresses, and got on famously with Grace Kelly, Tallulah Bankhead, Madeleine Carroll, and many others. His wit with sexual innuendo was well-known on and off the screen.

In The Thirty-Nine Steps, Hannay (Robert Donat) throws himself onto Pamela (Madeleine Carroll) in her train compartment, kissing her madly to deceive the police and to keep her temporarily silent. The policemen are tricked into thinking they are a newlywed couple in love. One says, "I wouldn't mind having a free meal in there."

Probably one of Hitchcock's most famous uses of sexual humor occurs later in the same film. Handcuffed together for their overnight stay in the inn, Pamela and Hannay settle in for an uncomfortable night together. Pamela decides to take off her wet stockings, but can only do so with Hannay's cooperation. He asks innocently, "Could I be of any assistance?" That line "convulsed audiences and brought protests from purity organisations" in the year of its release, 1935 (Perry 50). The humor in the scene is not unlike that in It Happened One Night. Both male and female must try to make the best of the situation. Rothman explains the dynamics of the stocking scene, why it works so well as comedy and as sexual innuendo:

> The camera tilts down to frame the memorable image of Pamela's hand slipping off her stockings, while Hannay's hand--manacled to hers--hangs limply. When the first stocking is off, his hand grabs her naked knee, and she thrusts a sandwich into it. When the second stocking is

> off, she takes the sandwich back, not missing a beat. . . When Hannay keeps his hand limp, he means to suggest that he is not in the slightest aroused by Pamela's proximity. True, this limp hand comes to life when it touches her flesh. But its arousal does not constitute Hannay's making a pass. The joking implication is that Hannay is a gentleman, but his hand, aroused by the touch of a woman's flesh, acts on its own, independent of his will. When she holds out the sandwich, she joins in the charade, displaying her power to order the hand around, to keep it in its place. This hand is easily distracted and mastered. (158)

The humor of sexual innuendo is not limited to The Thirty-Nine Steps. When Michael Redgrave is evicted from his room for making too much noise in The Lady Vanishes (1938), he thinks nothing of walking right in to Margaret Lockwood's bedroom, carrying all his baggage, with every intention of spending the night right there with her. After all, it was she who had him evicted!

In Rear Window (1954), the detective, always on the lookout for clues, manages to take a long look at the contents of Grace Kelly's suitcase as it lies wide open in James Stewart's apartment, revealing, of course, an elegant nightgown. And Miss Torso, just across the courtyard, fresh from her nightly battles with lecherous dates, surprises the viewer when she opens her door at the film's end. In walks her husband, a small, wimpy man in an army uniform who kisses her and then raids the refrigerator. Credits roll soon thereafter, and we can almost hear Hitchcock laughing over his little sexual joke.

Black Comedy

The fourth type of humor is of a strictly British style. Hitchcock himself called it the "humor of the macabre." He felt it was a typically London form of humor, and gave an appropriate and succinct example: "It's like the joke about the man who was being led to the gallows, which was flimsily constructed, and he

asked in some alarm, 'I say, is that thing safe?'" (McCarty & Kelleher 9). It is the kind of black comedy that arises from placing a potential murder in the midst of an otherwise safe and mundane environment, or the use of a grisly detail that is so shocking an audience must laugh in order to release the frustration or anguish. Hitchcock was indeed a master of this style of humor, and there are a very large number of examples that can be cîted. This paper will examine only a few of them.

Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol, two distinguished filmmakers in their own right, have discussed Hitchcock's Rear Window. They conclude the film is "half comedy." The very theme represents a humorous self-consciousness: "a man watches and waits while we watch this man and wait for what he is waiting for" (122-24). Both James Stewart and Thelma Ritter discuss blithely the gorey details of just how one would go about dismembering a corpse in order to tidily dispose of it. Grace Kelly is appalled at first but soon joins in on this macabre speculation. Stewart's life is threatened during the dark, terrifying climax of the film, as Raymond Burr stalks closer and closer. The black humor comes at the very end when the audience learns that Stewart is alive and well, although his fall from the window resulted in his other leg being broken.

Much has been written about The Trouble With Harry (1956). A film about a corpse who refuses to stay buried, The Trouble With Harry perfectly represents the Hitchcock brand of comedy. For Philip French, it is an "exercise in British black humour, with a closer resemblance to certain of his television films than to anything he had made before the war" (118). For Truffaut, the film demonstrates "an attitude of disconcerting nonchalance" wherein the various characters "discuss the corpse as casually as if they were talking about a pack of cigarettes" (Hitchcock 170). Confronted with this observation, Hitchcock replied, "That's the idea. Nothing amuses me so much as understatement" (Truffaut, Hitchcock 170).

Psycho (1960) is a film that few audiences would associate with humor. It is

the story of a brutal murder of a young woman in a shower, filmed in the stark reality of black and white. Yet, as Toles states:

> The persistent presence of wit in Psycho should not be mistaken, in the calmness of its operations, as a mitigation of brutality. Psycho's wit is hard and deeply ingrown; it stays well below the surface of action, strangely unavailable (on a first viewing) to characters and audience alike. It is only with Norman's final speech that the director's mode of joking seems to merge with the awareness of a figure within the film's world. When the mysteriously mocking voice of "Mrs. Bates" at last reaches us, we cannot avoid the feeling that in its paradoxically "vacant" depravity it is the one voice we have heard that genuinely expresses the film's tone: "It is sad when a mother has to speak the words that condemn her own son." (634)

Morris agrees with Toles in that the humor in Psycho is only experienced by the viewer at the film's end: "The comic detachment and pat finality of the psychiatrist's diagnosis of Norman Bates's illness are dramatically placed and undercut by the subsequent images that close the film" (54). Those images are, of course, Norman sitting alone in his cell, smiling, as his face dissolves into the skull of his mother, and the final shot of the car being dragged out of the swamp.

The macabre dominates another Hitchcock murder mystery, Frenzy (1972), wherein the killer must extract a clue to his guilt from the closed hand of a dead victim. The corpse is in the back of a truck loaded with potatoes, and the villain must break her fingers in order to retrieve the tie pin. Taylor argues that the horror of this memorable sequence "depends largely on its being at the same time callously, outrageously funny" (284).

End of a Career

Family Plot was Hitchcock's last film, released in 1976. Described by some

critics as "the surprisingly sunny creation of a seventy-seven-year-old master's autumnal wisdom" (Pechter 76), the film did contain some bright and witty moments but was not popular with audiences or critics. Shortly after its release, Hitchcock remarked regretfully to Francois Truffaut about the story lines he had been reading lately. His comments reflect clearly his desire to entertain audiences with his own unique blend of plot, character, and humor:

> So many stories seem to be about the neo-Nazis, Palestinians fighting Israelis, and all that kind of thing. And, you see, none of these subjects has any human conflict. How can you have a comedy [sic] Arab fighter? There is no such thing: nor can you have an amusing Israeli soldier. I describe these things because they came across my desk for consideration. ("Slow Fade" 45)

It would be incorrect to state that Hitchcock's films are comedies or that their popularity is due primarily to their comic elements. Hitchcock's own personal sense of humor was very real. His co-workers experienced it on the set and his many fans observed it in his films and teleplays. It is these humorous and outrageous scenes that help to make a Hitchcock film all that it is, and without those scenes--the ridiculous ethnic stereotype, the sexual innuendo, the macabre--his films would be something less than they are. But humor is only one part of Hitchcock's magical and consistently successful formula. Richard Roud summarizes the composite talents of the master of suspense:

> The great paradox, of course, is that he can manage to make such a fundamentally tragic view of life so entertaining! Black humor? Yes, of course, and also his infallible sense of pace and characterization, his unfailing deftness with both camera and actors, and ultimately, his matchless talent for sheer story-telling. (36)

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